

FISHERS OF MEN

By HENRY NORMANBY.

In the first number of the "Grand Magazine" we had the pleasure of presenting our readers with the first published work of a new author, Henry Normanby, of whom great things are confidently predicted. We now give a further specimen, as remarkable as was the first for a series of vivid word-pictures drawn with a bold hand.



KEEPING a sublime accompaniment to the trivial music of song and the foolish fall of dancing feet came the dull boom of tremendous seas thundering over the breakwater and the unbroken roar of the tempest sweeping in from the vast waters. The gale had blown heavily for two days and two nights, so that no boat of the fishing-fleet had put to sea, and the men sat idly smoking within doors, thankful for the peace and security of their homes.

Within the cottage of Miles Strangely the mirth was of the wildest description—as wild as the storm without. The wedding had taken place that day, and the bride and bridegroom, together with their friends, were putting the finishing touches to a scene of maritime joviality. There was no refinement whatever about it; song and jest were alike crude; the dancing was as primitive as one might imagine from the occupation of the performers and the fact that they were all men; the air was thick with the smoke of strong tobacco and prodigious quantities of rum-and-water were being hilariously consumed. The occasion, however, of this Bacchanalian festival raised it above the level of vulgarity and invested it with the garb of beauty. It was coarse but human; commonplace, yet decked with a certain grace, for this was the alliance of a brave man and a good woman, and the nuptials of Seraphim could be no nobler.

For many years had Miles Strangely served that hard task-master whose voice could be heard above the roar of the wind and the beat of the rain; for many weary years, by day and by night, had he toiled to the end that he might possess a fishing-boat, a cottage, and a wife. Time had been good to him, and at length he was owner of all three—the boat lying safe and snug in the harbour, his cottage here, his wife within it. A poor enough place, God knows! but it was his own, bought with his hard-earned money, and prized above the treasures of the earth. His wife was

clean and wholesome and fair to look upon. She was no scholar, her husband would have told you somewhat apologetically, but she could mend nets, cook the simple meals he was able to provide, was a rare hand at making old clothes new, and—good soul—loved her husband with a great and enduring love.

Much physical exertion disposes to thirst ; so, for the fifteenth time, the assembly were drinking the healths of the bride and bridegroom, until at length the happy man was sufficiently wrought upon to attempt a response. This he did in a style of oratory peculiarly his own. Rising with much deliberation, he laid one huge hand upon the table, and with the other removed the pipe from his mouth, utilising it as a pointer wherewith to emphasise and punctuate his remarks. They were as follows :

" Bill Davis, an' Harry Cray, an' Ben Mott, an' Sam Nider, an' Butty Careless, an' you too, Steve—every man o' ye, my mates, I don't want to say much, for I ha'n't the gift o' t, an' talkin' takes the wind out o' the clew o' my mains'l ; but afore you gets your anchor up and makes sail, I want to say a word o' thanks to ye all for comin' here to-night and wishin' of Bet and me well. I speaks for both of us, for Bet ain't much of a hand at the foghorn ; but, believe me, she's registered A1 at Lloyd's, clipper-built, all solid teak, and copper fastened throughout. It's a good many year ago since we first luffed up on the same tack, and I reckon I wasn't long in runnin' up speakin' signals. She just took my fancy, that there clipper did " (with an indicatory wave of the pipe in the direction of the lady). " ' I means to be skipper o' that yacht,' says I, ' for all her white canvas and nickel-plated binnacle '—an' struth ! 'twas true, too ; she's bin lyin' up a long time waitin' for me ; but here I am, boys, cap'en an' owner o' the Betsy Gale—it's a good name too—an' a gale I means to weather." He paused for a moment while his friends stamped and cheered ; then, leaving the language of metaphor, he went on, in deeply impressive tones, " Come over here, lass." She went to him, and he laid his hands on her shoulders, his broad and massive chest towering above her, " You waited a long time for me, God bless you ! an' I waited an' worked for you : an' now you're my wife an' I'm your husband, an' before all you chaps, my mates, I says, I mean to be straight with you, Bet, always. I mean to be good an' kind ; an' if ever I'm bad, if ever I'm cruel or ill-uses you, my girl, I hope that sea out yonder'll drown me dead like the dog I shall be ! "

As fitting answer to the rough dignity of his speech there came a brief cessation to the violence of the tempest, and for a few moments there was an absolute stillness ; then a chorus of laudatory voices broke out, a wild gust of wind shook the house, again the sea lifted up its majestic voice, and the spray joined with the rain in a deluge of driving water.

There were several more speeches, for much drinking had loosened the tongues of these usually taciturn men ; they shook hands with the married couple, then with each other, and finally they shook hands with themselves, then all set to for a valedictory caper. The fun was uproarious, the dance was at its height, the happy pair were footing a measure with the rest, the concertina was conscientiously doing its very worst, the

glasses were jingling together on the table, when, suddenly, a sound was heard above the clamour in the room and the stupendous tumult of the storm. It was the sound of a distant explosion.

"Rockets!" said someone; and instantly the dancing and merriment came to an end and everyone stood still listening. In a few minutes the sound was repeated, and every man knew that his way lay seaward. They belonged to the crew of the lifeboat, and rockets were being fired from a ship in distress.

Almost immediately came a clangorous summons from the bell of the lifeboat station.

The wife clung to her husband, lifting appealing eyes.

"Not to-night, boy," she besought him; "don't leave your wife to-night—Jimmy'll take your place—I'm afeard on't to-night!"

For answer he opened wide the door, and the breath of the sea and the might of the wind smote upon them. The rain had ceased and the sky was clearing. Detached masses of black cloud were sweeping beneath the moon. The sea was one wild white smother of foam. As they gazed upon it a bright light rose out of the water and shot into the heavens.

"Ah, there she is, out on the Great Auk!" said Miles. "Go ahead, my lads, I'm coming."

They tried to dissuade him, each man offering to find a substitute. "Aw, we can manage without you, lad; 'tis too bad to leave the missus now. Listen to me——"

He thrust them forth, and finally turned to his wife.

"Cheer up, lass; I shall soon be back. . . ."

"Oh, stay to-night, lad—I'm afeard!"

One strong arm was round her, with the other he pointed seaward. "There are men drowning out there, my girl. . . . Maybe they have wives too."

As he spoke again a light soared up into the sky. He kissed her and hurried out after his fellows, and she, throwing her shawl over her head and fastening it beneath her chin, followed the crowd which was assembling to see the boat go out. Other women were there—mothers, sisters, wives, and sweethearts of the crew. The wind struck at them viciously, blowing their hair out in long streamers, while the spray of the sea lashed in their faces, cutting and stinging like the end of a whip. Adding to the discordant noises of the night the bell went on sounding its great appeal, while the men hurried their preparations for launching the boat.

It was indeed a terrible night. The sea, unconditioned, unlimited, and resistless, was sounding its war note over the land. Above the high uproar of the bewildering wind it thundered its menace through the iron teeth of the deepsunk rocks, sweeping them unceasingly with huge hills of seething water. The wind blew in violent irregular gusts, which roared through the trees with such incredible fury that the very birds forsook their nests and sought shelter in bedraggled terror on the ground. The rain fell as though the sea itself were coming down from heaven. The noise alone was appalling. If God rode the storm that night 'twas a wild

journeying, for verily His hosts struck their spurs deeply and spared not. Yea, they were untamed chargers, those white-maned steeds of His, unchecked by His voice and untrammelled by His hand.

And all the while the rockets were shooting up over the shoulders of the Great Auk, that grim and sombre headland which had brooded over the waters for countless centuries, unchanged by calm or storm, heedless of the passing of the years, without pity and without fear, alone and immovable for ever.

A great shout announced that the boat was ready, and the crowd divided as it came out from its shelter, drawn by the strong arms of willing men. There was no time for sentiment; farewells, blessings, and god-speeds were shouted after them as the boat slid down to the water. The helpers stepped back from the dangerous surf, the crew leaped into the boat, and away it went on an outgoing wave, disappearing in a blinding mist of rain and spray.

It had been easier for a child to have striven with the might of a raging lion than for those men to have gone out in such an hour to meet the embattled squadrons of the sea.

So great was the violence of the wind that it was found impossible to set any sail, but the men, despite the hamper of their heavy oilskins and thick cork jackets, bent strongly to the oars, and drove the boat steadily through the giant waves. The coxswain was ill, and Miles Strangely had taken his place, and consequently had charge of the crew. He was steering.

Mayhap the thought of those they had left behind gave them an added strength and nerved them to a loftier courage, or perhaps the peril of those they were going to succour brought them their bravery, but certain it is that not a single man faltered for an instant, even when the boat, rounding the tail of the Shark's Back Shoal, encountered a sea the like of which had never been witnessed by any living soul.

The moon, unable to gaze steadily at the appalling scene beneath, kept veiling her face in the passing clouds, her occasional light intensifying the supreme desolation of the infuriate waters. On and on they went through the stress and turmoil of the deep. From seeming abysses rose monstrous black hills, which, rushing forward, leaned over and swept past the boat, flying like phantoms through the wilderness of the night.

The wind cut off the summits of the waves and hurled the icy spray in the faces of the dauntless crew. Sometimes a colossal hill broke right over them, and the men, warned by a shout from the helmsman, bent low and clutched the boat with a grip of iron. She laboured heavily then, until the water was thrown from her by the oblique climbing of the boat on the oncoming wave. They held their breaths at times when the treacherous sea, suddenly falling away, precipitated them headlong into a very hell of rushing darkness, and they caught it in gasps as they rose with a tremendous sweep to the foam-crested top of a thundering breaker.

Over the Shark's Back itself the uproar was indescribable. They could see it, and hear it, and feel it, and they had, most thoroughly, to keep away from it. On that shoal at that time the largest ship afloat would

have been ground into matchwood in the single sweeping of a wave. On they went through the strife and din.

"Easy, men! Let's see where we are—don't stop pulling—mustn't lose way on her!"

Keeping the boat's head to the oncoming seas, Miles Strangely endeavoured to ascertain their position. Dense clouds had again obscured the moon, and the rain was descending in blinding sheets. Just as they drove to the top of a mountainous wave a faint blue light was seen through the haze of rain and spray.

"There she is, boys, away to the west'ard! Lay to it, my lads, or we shall be too late!"

Once more they bent to the oars and the boat crept ahead against the opposing forces of wind and wave. Outside the shoal the sea was steadier, but the giddy swing of the majestic billows was amazingly stupendous.

They fought their way, these dogged and determined men, with a courage and tenacity above all praise, and three and a half hours after leaving the land the lifeboat was within hailing distance of the stricken vessel.

She proved to be the iron barque *Georgia*, sixty-eight days out from Baltimore, with a general cargo. Had had heavy weather all the way, and had lost mainmast and mizzen, all her sails, boats, and two anchors. Her remaining one had been dragging for some hours, but was now holding. Five of the crew had been washed away, there were no passengers, but the captain's wife was aboard. The message concluded, "For God's sake, don't leave us, we're breaking up fast!"

Nothing could be done in the intense darkness, so it was decided to get a line aboard and to lay to in the lee of the ship until daylight. The barque was informed that the lifeboat would stand by and would take off the crew in the morning.

All through the long hours of that terrible night these rude and untutored men kept their perilous vigil. No one complained, no one was impatient, no one afraid. With a sublime pity filling their hearts they waited for the coming of day. And in this manner Miles Strangely passed his wedding night.

At about seven in the morning the barque parted her anchor-chain and began to drive in to the shore. There was no time to lose, and the work of rescue was at once begun. One by one the crew of the vessel were drawn through the sea and taken into the boat. The captain's wife being the first saved and the captain, as usual, last. The salvation occupied a little over two hours; with its completion the ship and its company went separate ways for ever.

The sea, which had long been the servant of the stately vessel, now became utterly her master. It laid its strenuous hands upon her, tossed her idly to and fro, played with her roughly, struck at her ignobly with its vast strength, until at length, tiring of the sport, it gathered the ship in its spacious arms and cast her headlong into the mouth of the Great Auk.

The gale, which had never slackened for an instant, was now blowing

with hurricane force, and had raised such a sea that the sight of it struck dismay to the hearts of everyone in the boat. The men were worn out and exhausted by the interminable vicissitude of the night. Slowly and wearily they forced the deeply laden boat through the rolling water, back to the harbour and home.

Over the Shark's Back Shoal the ocean seemed literally gone mad. The breakers were rising in gigantic cliffs, and as the retiring waves struck against their advancing fellows they shattered each other into tremendous avalanches of dazzling spray. Over the deep booming of the heavy seas the sibillant note of the seething foam was always evident. The sight of the wall of water breaking on the sands was as appalling as a close acquaintance with the brink of Hell. As before, with the deepest respect, the crew kept away from it, not meddling with the business of the shoal and the sea. It was no concern of theirs; they left it to God alone.

Under the lee of the Shark they found some slight shelter, and, aided by the wind, drove steadily in to the land. Then it was that Miles Strangely, taking advantage of the smoother sea, handed the tiller to one of the men and proceeded to divest himself of his cork-jacket. Answering the inquiring looks of the rescued captain, he remarked unconcernedly, "There'll be a big tumble over the bar," and thereupon fastened the jacket round the woman. To her protest he replied: "Aw, now, it's only in my way—I can swim, and I'll wager you can't." To the captain he added, "I've a wife myself at home."

A fine sense of loyalty also prompted Butty Careless to offer his jacket to the captain, but this he would not for a moment allow; so Butty endeavoured to persuade Miles to accept it, and was depressed at the grateful but firm refusal. Each man made a similar offer, and in this high spirit they approached the bar.

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A great crowd had assembled on the beach to watch the incoming of the boat. It was first seen rounding the tail of the Shark, and for the next two hours it could only be distinguished at intervals. Now it was well in sight, driving dangerously before the gale. Miles Strangely's wife was amongst the crowd; she also had kept unvarying watch through the slow hours of the weary night, and had come out at daybreak to wait for the return of her husband.

An enormous surf was breaking on the beach, and the men were making preparations for rescue in the event of the boat capsizing. Signals had been hoisted to show the entrance to the harbour. The excitement was intense as the boat was seen to enter the broken water of the bar. It drove straight on, disappeared, came into sight again, and again disappeared. The watchers held their breaths as the brave boat was flung high into the air and then swept broadside into the boiling flood. A wail of despair and grief broke from the women as the sea completely engulfed it. In a few seconds, which seemed hours, the boat emerged, to be promptly buried again by a huge following wave. Again it rose, struggling magnificently. Sea after sea broke into it, and the boat became entirely

unmanageable. Then the helmsman was seen to stand up, evidently giving orders, for immediately he and all of the lifeboatmen, distinguished by their cork jackets, sprang into the sea. Relieved of its grievous burden the boat righted itself and rose to the waves. The swimmers could be seen struggling valiantly in the turbulent water. At the same moment the clouds broke, and the gorgeous rays of the sun poured down upon the awful scene.

At length, borne on the crest of a giant roller, the boat was swept in upon the shore and instantly dragged out of the clutch of the recoiling wave. With the rescue of the last of the lifeboatmen came a ringing cheer from the watching crowd, being instantly followed by a deep silence when it was seen that one man was missing.

The bitter cry of a lonely woman told in what manner Miles Strangely had returned to his wife.



AN AMBULANCE STORY.

Augusta was a maiden fair, but very proud and rich,
She didn't do domestic work, and never sewed a stitch;
But she took up the "first aid" craze, and all that sort of thing—
She knew the way to set a bone and how to make a sling.
Now, Edwin was an ill-paid clerk—as clerks not seldom are—
And so, though he Augusta loved, he worshipped from afar.
In truth, he knew her just by sight—this fact he did deplore,
And therefore hit upon a plan to get to know her more.
"She's in the ambulance, of course; ah, that will do for me—
I'll lie in ambush at her door, and be a 'case,'" said he.
So on a stile, which she must pass, for some hours he did sit,
And when she neared him, suddenly, he tumbled in a fit!
But fits were not Augusta's *forte*; she saw him as he lay.
"Oh, what a horrid man!" she gasped—then screamed and ran away!
Now Edwin's knowledge of disease was hazy to excess,
And of this one impromptu fit he made a grievous mess;
For as he lay and writhed and groaned, Augusta's ear to win,
A young policeman passed that way, said: "Drunk," and ran him in!
The magistrate who tried the case had never learned "first aid,"
So no defence was any good—the fine was meekly paid.